

Authentically African: Arts and the Transnational Politics of Congolese Culture.
Sarah Van Beurden. Athens: Ohio University Press, 2015. 372 pp *

Reviewed by Paula Girshick

This book focuses on the history of Congolese museums from early colonial rule, starting in the late 19th century, through independence in 1960 and the rule of Mobutu Sese Seko from 1966 to 1980. Sarah Van Beurden explores museums in both Belgium and the Congo as the latter changed from colonial property to independent state and then player on the international scene. She interweaves these political transformations with the impact of changes in Western classification—varying between ethnographic objects, commodities, art objects, and exemplars of national heritage—as well as their usage in promoting tribal, colonial, national, and international identities.

The political change from colony to independent nation of Zaire (now called Republic of the Congo) was fraught with conflicts between the governments involved. Van Beurden charts well how this was played out in the arena of museums. The Royal Museum for Central Africa in Tervuren acted as a monument to Belgian control over its colony. Over time, the focus of their colonial policy shifted from civilizing mission to cultural guardianship. Inside, the museum objects were displayed within an evolutionary framework but not labeled as “artifacts.” Instead, they were “crafts” and thus could be valued more than artifacts aesthetically and financially, a practice which worked to strengthen the perceived need to protect them in Belgium. At the same time, the Belgian policy of promoting art schools, developing arts and crafts, and, above all, establishing museums, notably the Institute for National Museums in Kinshasa (IMNZ), developed an art scene in the colony and laid the groundwork for a cultural agenda demanding political independence and the return of objects. Independence was achieved in 1960. Mobutu took over in 1965 and gave the country the name of Zaire in 1966. Traditional objects played a role in these negotiations because of their economic and symbolic value, especially as they were beginning to be recognized as “art” in Europe and America. Under his rule, the development and return of tangible heritage became a key to the concept of cultural authenticity, which he deemed crucial to a modern state.

In the negotiations over decolonization, Belgium had agreed to establish the IMNZ in Kinshasa, however, that did not eliminate the struggles with Tervuren nor did it prevent colonial ideas about art’s prestige and financial value from being incorporated into the museum’s approach. The earliest collecting activities were supposed to be aimed at gaining knowledge about Zaire’s different cultures in order to further modernization by establishing a national cultural identity. Van Beurden argues that in spite of the anti-colonial agenda of the regime, the IMNZ continued to create exhibits using the already established definition of what constitutes African art and failed to take into account the growing importance of popular painting at home and abroad.

Mobutu wanted the museum to compete with Tervuren as a center for scientific research with young Zairian scholars in the forefront. In the end, most of that research was done by foreigners.

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Van Beurden points out that this development occurred hand in hand with the growth of the art trade. By the 1950s, dealers and collectors began making trips to Zaire rather than purchasing what appeared in the metropolises. These foreign dealers as well as local traders began to scour the country to gather objects, which they sold to the IMNZ (which was supposed to have the first shot at them) or took them to European galleries and collectors. Although there was some legislation to regulate this activity it was not really effective.

However, in the mid- to late 1970s Mobutu's search for authenticity shifted to his promotion of a cult of personality and ultimately reduced interest in the museum. Although the IMZH began with great hopes, vanishing funds and government neglect had a serious effect and it was not to regain importance during the remaining years of Mobutu's reign. At the same time, however, international exhibitions became increasingly important to Mobutu's political agenda. The US began to play a greater role as a marketing and exhibition site for Zairian arts and crafts as well as a significant financial supporter of scholarship on Congolese arts. To exemplify this, Van Beurden takes a close look at four very important exhibitions in the US and their impact.

Although the style is very dense and sometimes repetitive, this is an important book that fills a gap in our knowledge about museums in this geographical area as well as our understanding of the role of political ideologies, a topic which has been well covered in South Africa, for example, but not as much by scholars in other parts of sub-Saharan Africa. The range of sources utilized and the detail and insight with which Van Beurden unravels Congolese political ideology in regard to both the conceptualization of the art and its exhibitionary practices make this an impressive analysis.

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